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A Shade of Beauty Ambiguity in Jean Giraudoux's Helen

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By

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I. Helen: Vision of Beauty

Portrayed as victim, whore, and above all, the supreme incarnation of beauty, Helen's story has been told and retold throughout the ages in various forms. Homer's *Iliad* relates the most famous account of the Trojan War, which she is alleged to have begun. Gorgias wrote a rhetorical defense of Helen, Euripides used her as the subject of one of his tragedies, and Ovid composed a pair of fictional love letters between Paris and Helen. Moderns continued to use her in such works as Offenbach's operetta, *La Belle Hélène,* Pierre de Ronsard's *Sonnets à la Belle Hélène,* and paintings by Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, among others. After so many iterations, though, later writers must have asked themselves the question Goethe poses in the prelude to *Faust*: "Wie machen wir's, daß alles frisch und neu\ Und mit Bedeutung auch gefällig sei?"[1] (ll. 47-48). What, if anything, would yet another representation of Helen contribute to the literary world? Better yet, what could each author do to make his or her own interpretation unique?

Rather than considering what certain artists can contribute to Helen's image in literature and other artistic spheres, it might be more effective to consider Helen's usefulness to the artist. Her renown makes her a sort of stock character, easy to adapt and insert into any setting. Helen's abduction from Sparta, and the war that followed, portray the dramatic extremes to which men will go for a beautiful woman. Yet, while as the "face that launched a thousand ships," Helen stands apart from several other beautiful women, the basic components of her story amount to a commonplace situation (Marlowe 49). Before Homer's narrative begins, the

[1] "How go about it so it will seem new,\ Significant and pleasing to them too?" trans. Walter Kaufmann

mythology has established a love triangle between Helen, her lover, Paris, and her husband, Menelaus. Although set on a grand scale in Homer, the Trojan War, according to most mythical accounts, is portrayed as a quarrel over a woman. In 750 B.C.E., Homer, as we presume, wrote of Paris's refusal to return Helen to her husband, Menelaus, which led to the fall of Troy. In his *Heroides*, a collection of fictional love letters, Ovid's Paris dismisses Menelaus as a country bumpkin, while declaring his passionate love for Helen. This conflict arises from one of Helen's primary characteristics: her status as the supremely beautiful, consummate lover.

This elevated rank simultaneously transforms Helen into an ideal. As the most beautiful woman in Western culture, a title conferred by consensus, her beauty depends primarily upon others' perceptions of her. Meagher points out that a "woman's desirability [. . .] is not intrinsic but is assigned to her by men. Like an item on auction, she acquires incalculable value the moment she becomes, for no reason proper to her, the object of fierce bidding" (38). When Paris abducts Helen and refuses to return her, he initiates this very bidding process to which Meagher refers. Menelaus responds by summoning his Greek allies and setting out to wage war on Troy. As the stakes rise, Helen transcends her original role as a beautiful woman and becomes the grand cause for the Trojan War, an ideal perhaps equal to one's country or religion.

This role as catalyst in the myth of the Trojan War both reduces her to an object and elevates her to a semi-divine status. After Paris declares Aphrodite the winner of a divine beauty contest, she confers Helen as his prize, without any mention of Helen's personal consent. In the *Iliad*, she cannot stop the war once it has started, and, as is the case with most of the events in Homer's work, she acts under the guidance of divine intervention, in this case by Iris and Aphrodite, on behalf of fate.[2] Agent or not, Helen provides sufficient cause for a war that

[2] In Book III of the *Iliad*, Iris comes to Helen and *casts upon* (ἔμβαλε) Helen longing for her homeland and for Menelaus (139-140). Later, Aphrodite snatches Paris and threatens Helen until she goes to his bedchamber.

eventually leads to Troy's destruction, a role that establishes her as a formidable force in her universe. Meagher argues that "Helen has no choice. Like Aphrodite, she *is* desire. Helen can no more resist the power that defines her than can others resist her" (27). To illustrate this point, he describes scenes from Greek vases that depict warriors lowering their defenses, or even dropping their weapons before Helen's beauty (32). Just as she operates both as an object and a semi-divine being, the power of her beauty is twofold as well: others fall helpless before her beauty, but she can do nothing to halt its consequences.

Her equally complex, and often ambiguous, role in the Trojan War makes Helen a tempting canvas through which any author could portray his or her own impressions of women, and also of society. She embodies an ideal beauty through her quasi-divine status as Zeus' daughter, but her role as the victor's spoils in the Trojan War reduces her to an object, both extraordinary and powerless at the same time. Although beautiful, she brings a disastrous fate in her wake, which makes her even more important when inserted in a wartime setting. As the vision of beauty which inspires men to go to war, what about her merits such a sacrifice? Further, do the ideals she embodies, often unattainable, as Arthur Ganz argues, merit the carnage of war (284)?

II. Jean Giraudoux and the Femme Fatale

In 1935, Jean Giraudoux posed Ganz's question when he designated Helen as this point of conflict in his play, *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*. Because of her ambiguous nature as both human and divine, object and agent, Giraudoux is able to illustrate various conflicts both

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However, even though Helen declares her own acts shameful, she bends under Aphrodite's ability to make her suffer a terrible fate (380-420). In line 3, Helen says of her life back home, ἀλλὰ τά γ'οὐκ εγένοντο· τὸ καὶ κλαίουσα τέτηκα, "but those things were not meant to be; so I pine away with weeping" (trans. A.T. Murray). These lines, and others in the *Iliad*, illustrate Helen's constraint by fate.

through the opposition between different aspects of Helen's personality and through her interaction with other characters. In short, Helen becomes the center of conflict in Giraudoux's play. This paper examines Helen's participation in and embodiment of conflict in three oppositions: endogamy and exogamy, war and peace, and France and Germany. Although Giraudoux's plays rarely convey a direct message, this paper also argues that certain conflicts embodied through Helen critique the French *mores* of his time, especially those concerning love and war.

Just as Helen has undergone several iterations throughout the ages, several artists have treated the subjects of love and war. What, then, makes Giraudoux's perspective on the war "alles frisch und neu" (Goethe l.47)? His thorough education and significant military and diplomatic experience placed war at the forefront of his concerns. Beyond this preoccupation, evident in a lengthy chronicle of Giraudoux's military exploits, his style, often compared with Surrealism, afforded an alternative to the direct, structured approach that had pervaded French theatre until Giraudoux's time. His work explored dualities such as dreams and reality, often blurring the lines between them. In his biography, Guy Teissier describes Giraudoux as "tiraillé …entre le rêve et la réalité, l'idéal et le quotidien, la création et les contingents du vécu"[3] (11). In the play *Amphitryon 38*, Alcmene appears to have spent the night with Jupiter, but Giraudoux never provides concrete evidence one way or the other. Just as Giraudoux simultaneously occupied Bellac, a small town in the Limousin region of France, and Paris, his works often interact with dreams and reality in the same manner.

Classical themes played a central role in Giraudoux's work from the beginning. Like most French children in the early 20th century, he received an education that exposed him to

[3] "torn between dreams and reality, ideals and daily life, creation and experience." N.B. All translations of non-English sources or phrases are my own unless otherwise noted.

Greek and Latin from an early age. In 1908, he published the short story "Le Cyclope," an adaptation of the famous episode from the Odyssey, and a pastiche of Homer written during his schoolboy days would début in 1919 as the novel *Elpénor*. During his career as a playwright, he would employ such Greek mythic characters as Alcmene, Electra, and, of course, Helen.

Giraudoux's situation in French literary circles already afforded him a unique perspective, but his work incorporated more than the typical French treatment of Greco-Roman themes. A self-proclaimed "âme franco-allemand,"[4] Giraudoux drew inspiration from the German tradition. In *Giraudoux et l'Allemagne*, Jacques Body explains that "[d]epuis un siècle la vie de chaque Français a été marquée par le voisinage de l'Allemagne; celle de Giraudoux plus encore"[5] (1-2). While learning about Homer and Virgil in school, Giraudoux also learned some elementary German, thanks to the French fascination with Germany at the time. Later, as a *normalien*,[6] Giraudoux would have encountered the Germans again through their commentaries on ancient texts. As Body remarks on Giraudoux's generation, "[q]u'on s'intéressât à Platon ou à Homère, à Prométhée ou aux artistes grecs, à l'égyptologie ou à la numismatique d'Alexandre le Grand, aux poètes latins ou à la Gaule Romaine, il fallait en passer par la science allemande "[7] (31). In addition to his academic encounters, Giraudoux completed two years of his university studies in Germany, and for a time, considered Munich his second home.

While in Munich, Giraudoux met Josef Ruederer, who, with Max Halbe, promoted the naturalist movement in German literature. While visiting with the young *normalien*, Ruederer found Giraudoux's knowledge of German literature, often the topic of their conversations,

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[4] "Franco-German soul"

[5] "For an entire generation, every Frenchman's life was influenced by Germany's proximity–Giraudoux's even more so."

[6] A term that refers to the *Ecoles Normales Supérieures*, the French universities reserved for the most outstanding students.

[7] "Whether you were interested in Plato or Homer, in Prometheus or the Greek artists, in Egyptology or Alexander

thoroughly impressive (Body 69). Also, Giraudoux developed an avid interest in Goethe during his time in Germany, so much so that he read several editions of *Faust*, as well as Goethe's journals and various commentaries on his work (Body 106). Before he had even begun his work as a diplomat in 1911, Giraudoux was well-acquainted with Germany and its literature as well as the Classical canon. Body writes that Giraudoux "reprend à l'Allemagne quelques thèmes ancien, Amphitryon, Judith, Hélène, Electre, Ondine, et introduit en France, revus et corrigés, leurs traitements germaniques"[8] (7). In his work, Giraudoux integrated three literary cultures: the Greek, which he studied, his native French, and his adopted German.

Siegfried, a piece addressing Franco-German relations, combines these three cultures in one play. Giraudoux's dramatic début, *Siegfried* opened in 1928, only ten years after the end of the Great War. Featuring a classical theatrical setting–that is, one which spans a day or less and shows no action onstage–this work revealed a fascination with German culture, which reappears later in the play *Ondine*, through Siegfried's own character, a Frenchman turned devoted German citizen after contracting amnesia during the war.[9] Eugen Weber remarks the significance of the title character's amnesia as an inspiration for France and Germany to forget their differences instead of nursing conflict (126). Under this assumption, Weber accuses Giraudoux of willfully ignoring history and current events in hopes for peace. This assessment fails to account for the extent of Giraudoux's wartime experience, as well as the general morale of the period. A veteran of the Great War who had suffered two serious wounds, each of which sent him home from the front, Giraudoux understood the gravity of war and longed for peace at most any cost. While giving a lecture in Paris in 1934, he declared that: "Les hommes qui ont éprouvé, en

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the Great's numismatics, in the Latin poets or in Roman Gaul, you had to experience it through the German method."

[8] "[Giraudoux] takes from the German tradition certain ancient themes, Amphitryon, Judith, Helen, Electra, Ondine, and introduces their German interpretations, revisited and revised, in France."

[9] Giraudoux's play *Ondine*, rooted in German mythology, was based on Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué's novel,

écoutant le premier coup de canon de la paix, autre chose qu'une joie sans borne, n'ont guère été que les profiteurs de guerre"[10] (*La Française et la France* 173). Weber describes the defeatist attitude that prevailed in France during the 30's, shortly after the economic boom that had followed the Treaty of Versailles (16-18). By that time, the French truly hoped, as did Giraudoux, that the Great War would be "*la der des ders*."[11]

Not only had morale declined sharply after the Great War, but by 1930, France had fallen into economic depression alongside many other Western nations. After fighting a war on borrowed funds, they expected to repay their debts using reparations ideally extracted from the Germans. However, as Weber remarks, "[t]he Germans, who had signed the Versailles Treaty with ill grace, approached reparations with grace iller still." The German government forced heavy inflation, thereby exacerbating the economic crisis which they experienced after 1930, which rendered the mark virtually worthless. Although the United States had arranged to help the Germans settle their debts, the crisis of 1929 ruined any such prospects (Weber 30). By 1934, domestic political tensions came to a head when the Action Française, an extremist right-wing party, incited a riot in Paris. A year after *La guerre de Troie*'s début, Hitler's forces reoccupied the Rhineland, and contrary to M. Giraudoux's wishes, the war would, in fact, happen.

Given the circumstances of the time, *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* corresponds neatly with the situation in 1934-5. Giraudoux frames his play in the time when Helen has come to Troy, but the Greeks have not yet declared war. Just as Germany hovered on the Maginot line, Helen's destructive fate threatens to bring war upon the Trojans. As Helen's

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Undine.

[10] "Men who have expressed anything other than boundless joy at the first sign of peace have been little more than wartime profiteers."

[11] "The last of the last." This phrase was popular after the Great War and expressed the French disenchantment that

participation in various conflicts unfolds, though, Giraudoux demonstrates not only the complexity, but the vague nature of the causes for war. Helen, after all, is defined by two major factors, both of which objectify her rather than admitting agency: others' perceptions of her, and her imminent fate.

Although her fate remains the same, perceptions of her shift frequently by definition. In Act I, scene iv, Cassandra refuses to acknowledge Helen as "gentille," to which Paris replies, "C'est toi-même qui m'as dit qu'elle avait l'air d'une gazelle"[12] (*La guerre de Troie* 480). Cassandra explains that she changed her mind after seeing a gazelle again, demonstrating how quickly new information or experiences can alter someone's perceptions. Even though Helen remains offstage until Act I, scene vii, most prior conversation centers upon her. Not only that, but the audience receives conflicting portrayals of her character from the two factions of Trojans: those who desire Helen's presence, and those who realize its grave consequences. Priam calls Helen "une espèce d'absolution"[13] for the old men of Troy and their past faults (*La guerre de Troie* 487), and Demokos labels her the personification of beauty (486). Hector prioritizes Helen's threat above her beauty, and tells Priam, "*L'avenir des vieillards me laisse indifférent*" (488). Troy's elders, after all, will not live to see the consequences of the coming war, something which no beauty can redeem[14]. The stage is set for Giraudoux's point of conflict, *la Belle Hélène*, as Offenbach called her in his operetta, or, as befits her destructive destiny, *la*

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followed, as well as the hope that France would see peace for a while.

12 "You told me yourself that she was just like a gazelle."

13 "a type of absolution"

14 This scene is reminiscent of the old men who tell Helen to go home in Book 3 of the *Iliad*, but in Giraudoux's version, Hector argues that Helen should go home while Priam defends their admiration of her. In the *Iliad*, the old men speak only of ἄλγεα, grief, and πῆμα, pain, but Giraudoux presents an argument both for and against Helen, drawing this portion of Homer's text into Giraudoux's universe comprised of opposing forces constantly at odds with each other rather than the Greeks' more concrete honor codes.

femme fatale.[15]

III. Inside and Out: Countries and Conventions

The origin of Helen's destructive fate coincides with the beginning of her exogamous relationship with Paris, and comes to fruition because her endogamous relationship with Menelaus remains intact. Her personal agency in the choice between the two comes into question in Act I, scene viii, when Giraudoux introduces Helen's "visions colorées,"[16] a trait unique to Giraudoux's interpretation of Helen. During her conversation with Hector, she reveals that certain people, certain objects appear to her in vivid color, and she chooses those she can see. "Je n'ai jamais bien pu voir Ménélas," she tells Hector, meaning that she has never been able to see him *in color* (*La guerre de Troie* 495). Although she subconsciously chooses Hector over Menelaus by ignoring Menelaus, she only does so because she cannot see her Spartan husband, a fact beyond her personal control.

Renée Zenon argues that Helen's method of prophecy through her *visions colorées* "souligne ainsi les rapports entre Hélène et le destin dont les décrets sont immuables."[17] (57) During their conversation in Act I, scene viii, Hector asks Helen whether she sees Troy burning, which she sees in bright red (*La guerre de Troie* 498). She responds similarly to Paris' death, and Hector's. With each response, she foretells an event that will happen during the Trojan War, but she also remarks that "personne n'est infaillible."[18] (*La guerre de Troie* 499). Even though her visions foretell events that will happen, she doubts her own accuracy. Once again, Giraudoux introduces a fatalistic tone, but suggests a certain ambiguity. The others believe

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[15] This expression has taken on several connotations in modern usage, but here I am taking the term *femme fatale* in its most literal sense: a woman inextricably bound up in fate.

[16] "colored visions"

[17] "Thus it highlights the ties between Helen and destiny, whose ordinances are unalterable."

Helen's visions, but does it matter that she doubts them for a moment?

Regardless, they have brought her to Paris, who adores Helen most of all because of her exotic origins. Giraudoux highlights this prominently attractive feature in Act I, scene iv when Paris declares, "J'ai assez des femmes Asiatiques. Leurs étreintes sont de la glu, leurs baisers des effractions, leur paroles de la déglutition[19]" (481). Saturation leads to boredom, and as a result of this ennui, people search for something new. Helen possesses that exotic appeal. Even better, Paris describes her as "far away, even in the midst of his arms." This statement confers upon Helen a certain mystery, and a means of maintaining her novelty. If Paris felt himself close to her, eventually he would grow tired of her as well. However, she remains the far-off ideal to which he can turn for the fresh experience he desires. Through this portrayal of Helen, Giraudoux simultaneously conveys the appeal of exogamy and the boredom associated with endogamy.

Despite the boredom implicit in her failure to "see" him through her "visions colorées," Helen's marital ties bind her to Menelaus, a fellow Greek, and although she claims that she will stay with Paris as fate has ordained, she never denounces Menelaus outright in Giraudoux's play. When Hector asks her whether she loves Paris or not in Act I, scene viii, she replies, "Je n'aime pas . . . connaître non plus mes propres sentiments"[20] (496). She absolves herself from her own sentiments in a fine display of Giralducian ambiguity. Although fate pushes her toward Paris, she herself remains powerless between him and Menelaus, a symbol to be influenced by exterior forces deciding her path. Without choosing either man, she participates, albeit passively, in both an exogamous relationship with Paris, and an endogamous one with Menelaus.

Even though Helen abdicates herself from her inner conflict between endogamy and

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[18] "No one is infallible."

[19] "I'm done with Asian women. Their embraces are like glue, their kisses burglary, their chatter mere slobber."

exogamy, Giraudoux enacts this conflict in the comparison between Helen and Andromaque, her foil in several ways. Helen engages in an illicit affair with a foreign man, while Andromache is happily married to Hector, a fellow Trojan, with a child on the way. Helen surrenders herself to fate, but Andromache fights to keep it at bay. This manifestation of the conflict between endogamy and exogamy constitutes but one of the ways in which Giraudoux pits his two Trojan factions against each other.

The conflict between endogamy and exogamy as enacted by Helen and Andromache operates on two discrete levels: the universal and the human. Elodie Ravidat argues that "[l]es tragédies de Giraudoux montrent toujours un contraste constant et plein d'ironie entre les mesures humaines et les mesures universelles"[21] (134). On the universal level, Andromache's endogamous choice represents not only her pacifism, but also a rigidly conventionalist attitude. When she attempts to confront Helen in Act II, scene viii, she accuses her of failing to love Paris. "Vous ne l'aimez pas," Andromache argues. "On ne s'entend pas, dans l'amour. La vie de deux époux qui s'aiment, c'est une perte de sang-froid perpétuelle"[22] (519). She insists that Helen conform to her standard and leave if she cannot love Paris in the manner that Andromache deems proper.

Andromache's account casts marriage as a passionless and exhausting state, and adds another layer to the *visions colorées* through which Helen's fails to see Menelaus. Helen's marriage lacks the passionate spontaneity of her abduction by Paris, but she sees both Paris and Troïlus in vivid color when she speaks of Paris in Act I, scene viii, and of her imagined kiss with Troïlus in Act II, scene i. Through Helen and Andromache's debate in Act II, scene viii,

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[20] "I don't like to know my own feelings either."
[21] "Giraudoux's tragedies always show a constant contrast full of irony between human and universal forces."
[22] "You don't love him. People don't hear each other in love. When two loving spouses live together, it's a perpetual loss of *sang-froid*."

Giraudoux portrays Andromache's efforts to convince Helen to "love" Paris as futile and unconvincing, thereby proposing a less constrained view of love.

Helen advocates this liberal mentality in opposition to Andromache's conventional idea of love. "Je ne le trouve pas si mal que cela, mon amour,"[23] she replies to Andromache's commendations of traditional love. Helen wastes no time mourning Paris's absence when he decides to play games with the other men, and she calls *aimantation*, sheer magnetism, "un amour, autant que la promiscuité. C'est une passion autrement ancienne et féconde que celle qui s'exprime par les yeux rougis de pleurs ou se manifeste par le frottement"[24] (*La guerre de Troie* 520). Such words as *aimantation* and *promiscuité* suggest objectification, a loss of the human element in love. However, she describes her sort of love as "une passion . . . ancienne et féconde," which suggests deeper elements than Andromache's essentially logistical contract between a man and a woman. When defining love, Andromache speaks of a couple's dowry, which evokes such conventions as arranged marriages (521). This couple lacks the passion of which Helen speaks, but as with many other conflicts in Giraudoux's play, this one will remain unresolved. Although Andromache's efforts to maintain peace are doomed to failure, so is Helen's beauty, the source of her power. Helen acknowledges that one day, she will be "vieillie, avachie, édentée, suçotant accroupie quelque confiture dans sa cuisine . . . Et ce que c'est coloré et sûr et certain!"[25] (521).

The opposition between Helen and Andromache illustrates a debate between different conceptions of love, but also between endogamy and exogamy. Andromache has married a fellow Trojan and advocates a staunch traditionalist view, whereas Helen conducts a

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[23] "I don't find it quite so bad, my kind of love."

[24] "...passion as much as promiscuity. It's a passion rich and timeless in another way, one that expresses itself through tear-reddened eyes, or manifests itself through friction.

[25] "old, hunched over, toothless, sucking on some jelly while she's stuck in her kitchen! . . . And how vivid and

spur-of-the-moment affair with Paris, a foreigner. Giraudoux himself had been romantically involved with a women both foreign and French by the time he wrote *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, Lilita Abreu and Suzanne Boland-Pineau being his greatest romantic interests. Lilita was a Cuban woman, the sister of Giraudoux's friend Pierre Abreu, whereas he met Suzanne, a French woman, while in Paris. By 1934, when Giraudoux would have been writing his Trojan play, Lilita had severed their romantic ties and married someone else, leaving Giraudoux to marry Suzanne after a long extramarital relationship. When *La guerre de Troie* debuted, Giraudoux's marriage had begun to rupture, but he remained close friends with Lilita Abreu until the end of his life, a preference which correlates with that given to Helen's position in her debate against Andromache.

Although Giraudoux gives preference to Helen, he introduces a grand conflict without a clear resolution in Act II, scene viii. He once said, "There are no great men, there are only great conflicts,"[26] and it is exactly this type of universal conflict which Giraudoux addresses in the debate between Helen and Andromache ("Les Cinq Tentations de La Fontaine," *OLD* 324). By presenting a grand, unsettling instance of the conflict, he arouses the audience to ponder it. Further, through Helen's ambiguous participation in the conflict between endogamy and exogamy, he illustrates the complex duality at work.

IV. Destiny's Demoiselle

Just as love and war keep the same company, Giraudoux uses Helen to discuss both in *La guerre de Troie.* Renee Zenon argues that he transforms Helen into more than the cause of the war that she represents in the *Iliad*, making her "l'incarnation même de la guerre"[27] (61). With the power of Helen's beauty comes the awe-inspiring terror similar to that which accompanies

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sure and certain that is!"

[26] This quote cited and translated on Cohen, p. 142.

war, and her *visions colorées*, through their vital role in her decisions, render her an instrument of fate. Although allotted a grand fate, the more human side of Helen seems harmless, and her refusal to know her own feelings about her destiny could indicate a desire for peace. Through Helen, Giraudoux enacts the conflict between war and peace by portraying her as inherently passive, but saddled with a destiny that threatens war. This conflict comes to a head when Hector asks Helen about Troy's fate in Act I, scene ix, and Helen tries to avoid seeing certain disasters while foretelling Troy's demise. Hector invokes the image of Andromache crying over his body, to which Helen replies, "Vous savez... Je peux très bien voir luisant, extraordinairement luisant, et qu'il n'arrive rien. Personne n'est infaillible."[28] (*La guerre de Troie* 499). Her denial indicates regret, and even an attempt at consolation. Nevertheless, Hector eventually dies, and Helen cannot deny her own fate.

Robert Meagher notes that Helen shares the title ἀδραστεία, or "inescapable one," with such goddesses as Artemis, Nemesis, and Leda (25). Further, he remarks the violence of her conception, when Zeus raped Leda in the form of a swan: "Bred in violence, Helen will go on to breed violence. The great war with its legendary savagery and carnage is engendered with her in the same instant, in the same womb" (2). Not only does she foretell disaster through her *visions colorées*, but her presence will bring war upon Troy. Through this fatal connection, and her subservience to fate, Helen personifies war itself.

Although born from, and sometimes identified with, war, Helen's personality rarely lashes out directly, and she occasionally produces a comic effect. Giraudoux portrays her as a silly woman who would appear harmless without the destiny following in her wake. When she first speaks in Act I, scene vii, Paris tells her to say she will never return to Greece, and Helen

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[27] "the very incarnation of war"

[28] "You know... I can see it clear as day, extraordinarily brilliant, and nothing happens. No one is infallible."

says to Hector: "Tu ne retourneras jamais en Grèce,"[29] instead of "Je ne retournerai jamais en Grèce,"[30] which would have been the proper response (*La guerre de Troie* 494). She commits an error that one would expect from a child, not the woman bringing destruction upon Troy. The brief exchange between Helen and Paris also would have produced a comic effect by recalling games that children play with each other. Through this miniscule error, Helen would be simultaneously reduced to the status of a child and opened to ridicule by the audience as the butt of a stock joke.

When Helen does assert herself, she incorporates elements both violent and peaceful. Fate operates, and sometimes speaks through, Helen throughout the play, and her proclamations eventually come true, even though she issues few direct orders to that effect. In an attempt to unveil Helen's reasons for eloping with Paris, Hector asks, in Act I, scene viii, if she hates Menelaus, an idea which Helen finds nonsensical (*La guerre de Troie* 495). Hector suggests that Helen might detest her husband on account of having seen him too much, but she answers: "Ménélas? Oh! non! Je n'ai jamais bien vu Ménélas, ce qui s'appelle vu. Au contraire."[31] (495). She then describes her *visions colorées*, and, considering this variable, Helen's failure to see Menelaus amounts to fate's rejection of Helen's endogamous relationship couched in a matter-of-fact tone. Helen's capacity to see people in color does not involve her own will or decisions. As she stated earlier, she feels no need to exercise control over her own destiny, but her rejection of Menelaus in favor of Paris brings war to Troy regardless. Even though she indicates no *personal* preference without the influence of the *visions colorées*, a strictly determined fate directs her, otherwise a harmless creature.

The opening scene of Act II portrays this struggle between the violent and non-violent

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[29] "You will never return to Greece."
[30] "I will never go back to Greece."

forces in Helen's character. Concerned with Troïlus and Helen's potential kiss, this scene features the two characters alone before the gates of war. Whenever Helen mentions the prospect of her kissing Troïlus, she speaks in statements or questions, uttering a lone imperative at the end of the scene. Linguistically, she presents little threat to him, and he refuses her every time throughout the scene. Before the scene's close, she provides a vivid description of their potential kiss:

> HELENE: A la fin du jour, quand je m'assieds aux créneaux pour voir le couchant sur les îles, tu serais arrivé doucement, tu aurais tourné ma tête vers toi avec les mains, -- de dorée, elle serait devenue sombre, tu l'aurais moins bien vue évidemment, -- et tu m'aurais embrassée, j'aurais été très contente... Tiens, me serais-je dit, le petit Troïlus m'embrasse!... Embrasse-moi[32] (*La guerre de Troie* 503).

Here, elements of Helen's "visions colorées," as well as the contrast between color and its lack, are evident, especially in the middle of her speech, when she says "ma tête . . . de dorée, elle serait devenue sombre." After Helen establishes the duality between "dorée" and "sombre," her language takes a turn toward action, although she continues to speak in the conditional tense, implying a sense of uncertainty. This uncertainty vanishes when Helen concludes her speech with the imperative, "Embrasse-moi," through which her language enters a more assertive tone.

Helen's imperative, the most aggressive element within her tone toward Troïlus, foreshadows the final moment of *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, in which Helen and Troïlus kiss before the newly-opened gates of war. Helen's brief imperative foretelling this event reflects little upon her, but rather upon fate. Her kiss with Troïlus marks the pivotal point at which the Trojan war will have begun. The rest of her speech, mostly composed of sweet

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[31] "Menelaus? Oh! no! I've never seen Menelaus really, at least what is called seeing. Quite to the contrary."

[32] "At the end of the day, when I sit among the rocks to watch the sun set over the islands, you would come softly, you would tilt my head toward you with your hands--golden, it would turn dark, you would see it less clearly, of course,–and you would kiss me, I would be very happy... Oh my, I would say to myself, little Troïlus is kissing me!... Kiss me."

nothings, holds little power in its conditional tense, and pales in comparison to the brief imperative that follows. Just as an entity that is "dorée" overpowers one that is "sombre," Helen's vicious fate overpowers her harmless human nature.

This conflict between war and peace within Helen concludes when the play begins. From Andromache's first line, "La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu," the audience comprehends the Trojans'–and Helen's–vain struggle against an insurmountable fate. If no one had fought a war over her, she would not have achieved her iconic status. In Act I, scene vii, the audience experiences Helen's folly through her childish parroting, but when she speaks of Troy's dark destiny, she appears an entirely different character. Giraudoux grants this destructive side the authority of the imperative, which easily defeats the weaker conditional and mirrors the conflict within her character.

Giraudoux opposes this destructive force to Hector's pacifism, established before Helen makes her entrance. When Andromache asks if Hector loves war, he responds, "Si l'on aime ce qui vous délivre de l'espoir, du bonheur, des êtres les plus chers."[33] (*La guerre de Troie* 477). Here, Giraudoux incorporates elements of his own personality in his character. As the warrior among the Trojan cohort, Hector understands the price of war, and hesitates to engage it unless absolutely necessary. In Act I, scene vi, he explains to Priam and Hecuba that he and his soldiers have just finished establishing peace for their country. "Nous entendons désormais vivre heureux, nous entendons que nos femmes puissent nous aimer sans angoisse et avoir leurs enfants"[34] (*La guerre de Troie* 487). Here, he remarks not only his own present weariness, but also that of Andromache and the other wives, ultimately looking toward a happier future in peace.

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[33] "If you love that which deprives you of hope, happiness, the people you hold most dear."

[34] "We hope to live happily ever after, we hope that our wives can love us in peace and have their children."

After Helen explains her *visions colorées* to Hector, he questions her about the future of his city. Hector describes Helen's glorious return to Menelaus, complete with all possible ceremony, but she insists that Menelaus appears "*tout sombre*." (*La guerre de Troie* 498). When faced with this stark imperative from fate, Hector musters the fighting spirit that Helen herself lacks. "Vous doutez-vous que vous insultez l'humanité?"[35] he retorts, denouncing her *visions colorées* as "la dérision du monde."[36] (*La guerre de Troie* 498). As the struggle within Helen herself occurs between her humanity and her ties to fate, Hector attempts to defend humanity against Helen's fatalistic ordinances. Despite these efforts, when he asked if she sees Troy burning, Helen describes it as "rouge vif," and her overwhelming fate, with its vivid, violent words, conquers Hector's humanity. Everyone knows that the Trojan War will happen, and as a result, Helen's warlike presence easily overcomes Hector's pacifism.

This conflict illustrates one of Giraudoux's primary concerns in his work: humanity's doomed struggle against fate. In *Amphitryon 38,* Alcmene consorts with Zeus despite her efforts to remain faithful to her husband. Judith, the subject of another earlier play, spends the night with Holophernes and fulfills the prophecy even though the high priests work to prevent it. Giraudoux penned one of his greatest fatalistic endings after *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, though, in *Sodome et Gomorrhe.* After failing to find one married couple that loves each other, God abandons the world, and the play ends with the main characters onstage as the world collapses around them. In *La guerre de Troie*, the war begins because Demokos, the Trojan poet, claims falsely that Ajax killed him after Hector's stray spear, originally meant for Ajax, strikes him. Because of his mistake, Hector looks on, powerless, as Helen and Troïlus kiss before the open gates of war, all because of a misunderstanding. As in many of his works,

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[35] "Don't you know you're an insult to humanity?"

[36] "the laughingstock of the world"

Giraudoux leaves his Trojans in the hands of a merciless fate.

V. Marianne vs. Maginot

Hector's struggle against Helen and her fate in Act I, scene ix most likely reminded the audience of the situation between France and Germany in 1935. Hector poses question after question, hoping to propose one catastrophe that Helen cannot see. As a seasoned diplomat, Giraudoux would have known about the conflict brewing in Germany, especially since warning signs had begun to show by that time. In his biography of Giraudoux, Guy Teissier describes a large influx of German immigrants to France in 1933 with the rise of Nazi powers, and asks: "Est-il [Giraudoux] déjà conscient que l'accueil de ces nombreux exilés va soulever en France de sérieux problèmes, déchaîner des réactions violentes de nationalisme, d'antigermanisme et d'antisémitisme?"[37] (Teissier 268). When Giraudoux was writing *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, Teissier's remark suggests that the playwright and diplomat would have noticed the signs of nascent conflict. In his portrayal of the conflict between Hector and Helen, Giraudoux reflects his own concerns regarding this growing strain in Franco-German relations.

The escalating tensions with Germany would have weighed heavily upon Giraudoux and his "âme franco-allemande." Despite his personal involvement in the situation, though, Teissier notes that "observant scrupuleusement le devoir de réserve de sa fonction, Giraudoux se tient à l'écart des prises de positions des partis"[38] (285). In his writing, and especially in personal interviews, Giraudoux rarely revealed his positions, political or theoretical, and refrained from partisanship throughout his career. His first play, *Siegfried*, which débuted in 1928, betrays his sympathy toward Germany alongside an evident love for France. Although he later oriented

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[37] "Was Giraudoux already aware that the reception of all these exiles was going to arouse serious problems in France, to incite violent reactions of nationalism, anti-German sentiment, and anti-semitism?"

[38] "As a scrupulous observer of his duty to discretion as a diplomat, Giraudoux kept his distance as far as taking sides between parties."

himself against the Nazis, he maintained sympathy for the German people and their own struggles. In this earlier play, he constructs a striking portrait of both the French and the German spirit, and although clear friction arises between the two, Giraudoux's sympathy for both sides is clear when Gèneviève speaks of France, or when Eva speaks of Germany and the great deeds that Siegfried can accomplish there. Giraudoux ultimately recognized France as his lifelong home, but he conveyed his admiration for both France and Germany in *Siegfried*.

Helen's destiny in *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* resembles one case in which Giraudoux refused to side with the Germans: Germany's threatening presence on the edge of the Maginot line in the early 30's. Years after the events in *Siegfried*, Helen poses a constant threat before any moves have been made. When she first appears in Act I, scene vii, she appears mostly harmless, and in Act I, scene viii, she says of her lovers: "Je ne les déteste pas. C'est agréable de les frotter contre soi comme de grands savons. On est toute pure..."[39] (*La guerre de Troie* 496). Men for her are simple commodities, like a bar of soap, to use as she pleases, and yet her statement reveals her naïveté. Her designs toward men appear simple, aimed only at pleasure, and she speaks of feeling clean immediately afterward. Here, Giraudoux paints a childish, almost innocent portrait of Helen. This human side of the *femme fatale* presents a placid front for a destructive force, just as Germany pretended to respect the Maginot line while their forces lay poised to strike.

In her debate with Andromache in Act II, scene viii, Helen drops her peaceful front and reveals a cold, harsh nature when defending herself against Andromache's claims. Helen admits herself "pas très forte en pitié," and explains to her "sister-in-law" that she, too, has known and withstood hardship (*La guerre de Troie* 520-1). Regardless of their actions toward other

[39] "I don't hate them. It's lovely to rub them against yourself, as though they were a luxuriant soap. Afterward, you feel so clean..."

countries, the Germans had suffered more than enough alongside the rest of Europe. As the defeated party, the Germans would have seen no reason to pity the French, and considering the typically strained relations between the two countries, would have considered it their right to take back what they had lost. With these conditions in place, the stage was set. Germany *would* cross the Maginot line, and, in Giraudoux's play, the Trojan war *will* happen because it is fated so. In his discussion of Helen's similarities to such goddesses as Aphrodite, Meagher mentions her epithet ἀδραστεία, or "inescapable" (25). This epithet corresponds perfectly with her fate, as well as the fatalistic role which Giraudoux assigns it. Just as the Greeks found Aphrodite and her wild love inescapable, the Trojans will not escape Helen's destiny unharmed.

In ancient Greece, after all, Aphrodite was no goddess of Valentine's Day cards, but a ruthless entity to be feared for her unbridled nature. A common myth details the story in which Aphrodite and Ares are caught in the midst of their debauchery, implying close ties between Aphrodite's passionate breed of love and Ares' violent, excessive warfare[40]. Body writes in his book, *Giraudoux et l'Allemagne*, "Cet amour de la guerre n'est pas dans les traditions littéraires françaises . . . il est vraisemblable qu'il rend ainsi aux Allemands ce qu'il a appris d'eux: . . . que «la bonne guerre est ce qui sanctifie toute chose» comme le disait Nietzsche"[41] (Body 192). Choosing only those people whom she can see, Helen requires no justification for her choice to remain with Paris except her ability to see him. In response to Andromache's claim that the war would be justified if only Paris and Helen "loved" each other, Helen replies, "Pourquoi? S'il suffit d'un couple parfait pour vous faire admettre la guerre, il y a toujours le vôtre,

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[40] The theme of women and violence recurs throughout Giraudoux's theatrical corpus. In *La guerre de Troie*, Act I, scene iii, Andromache inquires into the workings of war, and a similar scene appears in his earlier play, *Judith*, when Judith asks her lover, Jean, how to kill a man. Tessa, the title character of the play preceding *La guerre de Troie*, ultimately brings her lover to his ruin, since his love incites him to move to Brazil where he and Tessa live in squalor until Tessa's death at the end of the play.

[41] "This love of war does not exist in the French literary tradition. . . it makes sense that Giraudoux gives credit to the Germans for what he learned from them. . . . that 'the good war is what sanctions everything' as Nietzsche said."

Andromache."[42] (*La guerre de Troie* 521). Just as the Maginot line failed to prevent Germany from amassing its forces and eventually occupying France, Andromache's arguments for her definition of true love fail to convince Helen to submit to her standards. Body quotes Nietzsche, observing that "a good war justifies everything," and the Trojan War justifies Helen's love. Fate, which, through its link with the *visions colorées*, defines "good" and "bad" in Helen's universe, has nominated her as the catalyst, declaring the war in her name a good one. Helen wins her argument with Andromache because her presence instigates a war, and Andromache causes no such reaction.

Priam defends Helen when he explains to Hector that, for the old men of Troy, she constitutes "une espèce d'absolution . . . à celui-là qui a volé, à celui-là qui trafiquait des femmes, à celui-là qui manqua sa vie, qu'ils avaient au fond d'eux-mêmes une revendication secrète, qui était la beauté"[43] (*La guerre de Troie* 487). The existence of such an ideal as Helen affirms some remaining good in the world for the old men of Troy, and Priam, himself an old man, sympathizes with them. The old men of Troy adore Helen with almost religious devotion, proving the extent of the semi-divine power granted her by her beauty. In these scenes, she incarnates an ideal, a beautiful woman worthy of admiration. Demokos and the Géomètre also extol her as a symbol of beauty and measure in Troy. This national symbolism, paired with the correlations between France and Troy in Giraudoux's play, evokes the Marianne, the national symbol of France. Like Helen, Marianne may have been a real woman, but what matters is not her actual personality as a woman, but rather the legend and symbolism surrounding her.

Helen evokes the image of the Marianne in a different way at the end of Act II, scene viii,

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[42] "Why? If the perfect couple was all you needed to admit to the war, there's always yours, Andromache."

[43] "A form of absolution . . . for that one who stole, that one who trafficked women, that one who wasted his life, and because of her, deep within them they had a secret claim, which was beauty." In the *Iliad*, however, the Trojan elders beg Helen to go home before she brings grief to them and their children (αλλὰ καὶ ὥς τοίη περ εοῦσ' εν νηυσι

when she describes her future as an old woman, after her beauty has gone. Although Giraudoux could not predict the consequences of World War II, he had experienced the devastation that accompanied the Great War, and the image of "une Hélène vieillie, avachie, édentée, suçotant accroupie quelque confiture dans sa cuisine" reminds a modern reader of the state of France after World War II, which was sometimes symbolized by a frail, sickly Marianne. Once again, Giraudoux establishes two sides of Helen, and, rather than favoring one over the other, opposes them to each other in the type of conflict central to dialectical drama. With this tension, he encouraged the audience to question, and potentially improve Franco-German relations at the time by discussing the German plight alongside the French.

VI. The Mystery of Giraudoux

When asked if he had written *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* specifically about the current situation between France and Germany, Giraudoux replied, "Ne croit-on pas toujours faire des allusions actuelles quand on parle de la guerre?"[44] (*Théâtre Complet* 1158). As is often the case with Giraudoux, his intentions remain well-veiled, but the situation in *La guerre de Troie* and current events of the time resemble each other too closely to dismiss their potential as a commentary on the situation in France in 1935. As a diplomat, Giraudoux had traveled extensively to Germany, as well as the United States and England, and had served in Turkey with the French military, close to Troy itself. Through his experience with Germany, he understood the threat at hand, but as a veteran in France, which experienced severe difficulties in recovering from the Great War, he also understood more than anything the need for peace, and the cost of war.

Giraudoux's Helen may have related to the aggravated situation between France and

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νεέσθω,\ μηδ' ἡμῖν τεκέεσσι τ'ὀπίσσω πῆμα λίποιτο, III.159-60)

[44] "Doesn't one always assume to be making allusions to current events when one speaks of war?"

Germany in the early twentieth century, but she also represents the more general conflict between war and peace. Violent tendencies exist in all of humanity, and Helen stands as a paragon of these tendencies, the woman born of rape who throws two nations into a devastating war, as Robert Meagher remarks (2). This violent beauty simultaneously presents hope for salvation through an ideal, perhaps the ideal that Giraudoux sought for himself. When considering Act I, scene vi, in which Priam calls Helen a type of salvation, one must remember that Giraudoux had lived as much as, or possibly more than, the old men of Troy when he was writing this scene. After several love affairs, both successful and not, as well as an eventful military career and a failed marriage, he of all people would have understood the need for peace, for redemption, for some sort of resolution.

As much as he craves peace, though, Giraudoux's universal forces never rest. Helen encompasses war and peace, endogamy and exogamy, France and Germany, all at once. He understood that the world is composed of opposing forces, rather than right and wrong, and that these forces exist in all people and situations in varying equilibria. Even though the Trojan War will happen without a doubt, Hector struggles against it until the very end. Rather than charging headfirst into battle, the valiant hero of Troy fights for peace. When asked if he loves war, Hector replies, "Si l'on aime ce qui vous délivre de l'espoir, du bonheur, des êtres les plus chers"[45] (*La guerre de Troie* 477). This response reflects the same sentiments as Giraudoux's commentary on war from the beginning of this essay: "Les hommes qui ont éprouvé, en écoutant le premier coup de canon de la paix, autre chose qu'une joie sans borne, n'ont guère été que les profiteurs de guerre" (*La Française et la France* 173). Although Giraudoux never openly identified a philosophical agenda in his work, he did convey certain tendencies of his own

[45]"If you love that which deprives you of hope, of happiness, of those you hold most dear."

through his characters in such lines as Hector's arguments for peace.

By showing Helen to the world, both with and without her fate, Giraudoux exposes the frivolous causes people fabricate for starting wars. In his play, Helen amounts to a frivolous woman driven by fate, and in the final scene of the play, Ulysses or Hector fail to begin the Trojan War, while Helen becomes an innocent bystander. Hector casts a spear at Ajax after he catches him looking at Andromache, and strikes Demokos by mistake. Demokos insists that Ajax cast the spear, and the Trojan War begins. By dismissing Helen from her role as catalyst, Giraudoux portrays a war founded not upon glorious ideals, but rather upon trickery and miscommunication. Arthur Ganz argues that the quest for an ideal such as Helen leaves Giraudoux's characters "doubtfully suspended between a mortal world, empty and desolate, and a visionary one, fatal and forever unattainable" (284). Although mortality's bleak nature, exacerbated by such events as war, pushes humanity to seek after a greater ideal as a means of escape, Ganz argues that this ideal rings hollow, and Giraudoux, in his portrayal of Helen, seems to concur.

Giraudoux experienced the life of a soldier as well as the life of a government official. He knew both sides of the battle lines, and he wanted peace all the more for it. Rather than pursuing Helen, a vague, ambiguous ideal, Giraudoux might encourage people to consider more seriously the value of peace, and what they surrender in choosing war over peace. As Herodotus once wrote, οὐδεὶς γὰρ οὕτω ἀνόητος ἐστὶ ὅστις πόλεμον πρὸ εἰρήνης αἱρέεται· ἐν μὲν γὰρ τῇ οἱ παῖδες τοὺς πατέρας θάπτουσι, ἐν δὲ τῷ οἱ πατέρες τοὺς παῖδας[46] (*Historiae* I.87). In *La guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, Giraudoux questions the choices people make between the two, and the reasoning behind those choices, through Helen, the grand ideal who fails to launch a

[46] "No one is as ignorant as the person who chooses war over peace; for in peace, sons bury their fathers, but in war, fathers bury their sons."

single ship.

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